In 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' T. S. Eliot writes:

'In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.'

It is, we assume, his sculpture or painting the women are discussing. But Eliot, the poet, might have Michelangelo's verse in mind; Buonarroti Michelangelo wrote more than 300 poems.

Michelangelo's achievement in other fields overshadows his contribution to literature. But there might be another reason. When he was 57 Michelangelo met Tommaso de' Cavalieri, who was 24, and wrote a sequence of love sonnets addressed to him - the first sequence of poems addressed by one man to another since classical times. It predates Shakespeare's 'fair youth' sonnets by half a century. But when his grandnephew published Michelangelo's poems for the first time, in 1623, he changed the pronouns to the feminine.

400 years later the poet Andrew McMillan investigates Michelangelo's poems, talking to Dr Ambra Moroncini, who, as Senior Lecturer, teaches them at the University of Sussex, and to Professor Konrad Eisenbichler, who, as well as literature, taught a course on sexuality and gender in the Renaissance at the University of Toronto.

Colin Matthews, who was Benjamin Britten's assistant, talks about his 'Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo'. The composer's setting was a love gift to his partner, Peter Pears.

McMillan discovers growing interest in Michelangelo's poems today, especially among queer writers. Alex Cocker has just published 'Say, Spirit' in which they make versions of the sonnets, each three times, in the voices of three imagined translators.
They all talk of Michelangelo - the poet - and we hear his poems, translated by James M. Saslow, read by Sir Simon Russell Beale.

Presenter: Andrew McMillan
Producer: Julian May

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